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February 20, 2013

The Honorable Charles F. Bolden, Jr.
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 E Street, SW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Bolden:

The vivid images of last Friday's meteor streaking across the Russian sky quickly made their way around the world, captivating the public and leaving many to wonder how such an event could happen without warning. On the same day, much of the world's astronomical focus was on an asteroid, 2012 DA14, which safely passed the Earth, but came close enough to warrant attention. These events, while coincidental, raise questions about our preparedness for future objects coming toward Earth.

The meteor in Russia resulted in nearly 1,000 injuries, mostly due to broken glass caused by the explosion from the meteoroid entering our atmosphere. This devastation serves as a blunt reminder of the dangers that cosmic objects pose to human safety and wellbeing. The likelihood of a catastrophic event may be low, but the consequences are sufficiently dire to warrant preparation. An early warning could enable steps to mitigate damage and limit the loss of human life.

Locating and tracking these objects is clearly just the first step in preparedness. The ability to eliminate the threat of an asteroid or meteor impacting Earth, colliding with the Moon, or disrupting our space-oriented communications and scientific equipment could be vital. We would be remiss if we did not use the recent events as an opportunity to survey our current capabilities and assess how we can better use limited resources to identify potential threats.

Please respond to the following questions by March 20, 2013:

1) Please explain the current arrangement for tracking cosmic objects. To what degree of certainty are the objects which pose a threat to Earth being monitored? What type of coordination is occurring on an international scale?

2) What shortcomings are currently present in NASA's ability to accurately track and predict cosmic objects which may pose a threat to Earth, the Moon, our satellites and other space-oriented apparatus?

3) How achievable are current NASA plans designed to eliminate the threats posed by cosmic objects on a collision course with Earth?

4) How much lead time is necessary between identifying a threat to Earth and its neutralization employing the current NASA strategies?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I look forward to reviewing your response.

Sincerely,

F. JAMES SENSENBRENNER, JR
Member of Congress